REPORT

Ritual Remnant (ucchista) in Vedic Ritual


By

Ms. Barbora Sojková

Ms. Barbora Sojková (hereafter referred to as ‘the candidate’) has written a thesis titled “Ritual Remnant (ucchista) in Vedic Ritual” for her M. A. degree of the Charles University, Prague. I have gone through the thesis. A report based on my observations concluded by my recommendation is given below:

The purpose of this study, as the candidate puts it in the “Abstract” of the thesis, “is to investigate and interpret the position and meaning of the remnant of oblation in the system of classical Vedic mythology and ritual” (p. 8). For this study, she has made a brief survey of the primary sources that have a wide range. She has also consulted important and relevant secondary literature on this topic and has followed a standard methodology being used by most of the scholars in the field of Indology.

The concept of remnant of oblation or left over is expressed in Vedic literature by a number of terms, namely, uchchista, sheša, or vāstu. All these terms have been used in the later, classical Sanskrit literature. However, they have acquired different connotations. The word sheša is found to have been used in a general sense of “remnant” or “remainder”, not necessarily that of food; while, the term uchchista has a specific meaning “the remainder of food”. The word vāstu does not seem to have the sense of remnant in the classical literature, but appears to have been used in early Vedic texts to express the same idea. It is therefore important to examine the Vedic terminology, trace the etymology of these terms and the mythological connotations they have particularly in the Brāhmaṇa literature, where the usage of those terms is found in the particular context of the solemn rituals (srauta), in the non-sanguinary oblations (īśī) as a part of that ritual, as well as in the ancestor worship (pindapitrājña). All these aspects have been discussed by the candidate in the first four chapters of her thesis.

In the Introduction (chapter 1), the candidate first mentions the Vedic sources she has used and discusses the term Vedism. This term refers to the oldest extant Indian religious culture described in the Vedas, generally supposed to have been composed and compiled between 1500 and 500 BCE. This culture is also described sometimes by another term, “brahmanism”. However a distinction between these two can be made, as they refer to two stages, successive, but not exclusive of each other. A detailed discussion on these two terms can be found in an article written by J. C. Hecsterman in the Encyclopedia of Religion (General Editor, Mircea Eliade, Macmillan, 1987).

The concept of remnant has been dealt with in the late Vedic texts called Dharmaśūtras and has been discussed and explained by a number of scholars. One of the important works is that by Charles Malamoud written originally in French and translated by D. White, under the title, Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India (Delhi, Oxford India Paperbacks, 1998). However, the notion of the remnant has changed “dramatically” in those texts. It should be noted that the
Brāhamaṇa and the Śrauta texts, where the notion occurs in the ritual context and is explained by narratives or myths, has not been studied in detail. The candidate not only points out the shortcomings in the research done by Malamoud, but systematically explains the notion that occurs in the earlier Vedic literature and the late Vedic Śrauta texts that describe in minute details the ritual of īśṭi and the solemn ritual of the Soma sacrifices, where the ritualistic remainder of food play an important role.

After having discussed various aspects of the notion of the remnant, the candidate, summarizes her argument in the following words:

“Based on the evidence of the texts, it seems reasonable to propose that one of the most prominent features of the leftover is that it assures a continuity. I suggest that the continuity is a variant of fertility and procreation. The yajamāna does not want to be wealthy and have sons just for the sake of it – he wants, rather, to ensure his place in heaven by having a son who will offer oblations for him and his ancestors. To have a son is the Vedic version of immortality, the “fertility” par excellence.” (p. 59).

The thesis has elaborate Bibliography that evinces colossal industry on part of the candidate and the systematic study of the concept she has made.

I strongly recommend that the thesis may be accepted and that the candidate may be awarded the M. A. degree Charles University, Prague.

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